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Mao Tse Tung at the Wilderness Tavern

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Mao Tse Tung at the Wilderness Tavern

With apologies (and gratitude) to the playwright Steve Martin whose play Picasso at the Lapine Agile, an imaginary conversation between Pablo Picasso and Albert Einstein in a Paris bar in 1904, was the inspiration for this paper

Place: The Wilderness Tavern, somewhere in Virginia

Date 15 April 1865

Time 6:00 P.M.

The scene opens with two ethereal gentlemen seated at a corner table in a dark and dingy 19th Century Virginia tavern. There is a bartender (who keeps bringing the customers large drafts of local ale) but there are no other customers. Each table has a single candle that is flickering in the cold night air that is coming through the cracks in the old wooden walls. It is unseasonably cold for a spring evening in southern Virginia. At the only occupied table sits the stately and imperious Carl von Clausewitz who has been dead for 34 years and the intense and aloof Mao Tse Tung who will be born in 28 years. As the scene opens, it is clear from their expressions and loud voices that the two gentlemen have been arguing.

Mao Tse Tung. Let's change the subject before this discussion turns violent. And, let's face it, we both know something about violence. You will never convince me that war is a paradoxical trinity since I already know that war has a dual nature. Obviously, you haven't studied your dialectics very well. And you call yourself German. You must have had a bad education.

Carl von Clausewitz. Okay, this once you win. And since I've had one heart attack already, I've been told to keep my blood pressure under control. Here is a less contentious subject: military genius. I see it in three--sorry--I see it's having multiple aspects. A military genius must have an outstanding temperament and an outstanding intellect and these characteristics must be directed towards military success. "V" as in Victory.

Mao. If not profound, at least interesting. Since I will eventually read and critique your ideas, let's start now. Tell me about these qualities and I'll tell you whether I agree with you. Not that I expect to change your mind but it's a good mental exercise for me. I have the feeling that I am going to be starved for intellectual stimulation during my so-called Early Years.

Clausewitz Alright I'll begin with temperament which is your psyche, that inner place where values and character reside. Your temperament includes several qualities and I'll start with the one called "boldness" because it is the first prerequisite of the great military leader.¹ It's the ability to proceed towards your goal despite all the dangers in your way. It's staying the course as directly and forcefully as possible. Given the violence, chaos, suffering, uncertainty and danger of warfighting, can you imagine a great commander without boldness?

Mao: Absolutely not. I always taught my soldiers that there will be no victory without courage in battle and that they must have "no fear of sacrifice, no fear of fatigue and continuous fighting"². But the commander requires more virtues than his troops. Certainly, the commander must have all the basic military virtues (e.g., physical strength, courage) but he also needs the determination to "press on" despite the hardships and setbacks. I did not always win every battle in my career but I "stayed the course" and I believe that I eventually won the war against the imperialists. I hope there are Americans listening.

Clausewitz Maybe this isn't so surprising but the higher up in the military ranks you go, the less you witness boldness. Generals are generally a cautious lot which is why so few generals are true heroes.

Mao On this I can agree with you wholeheartedly. It isn't meant for every man to rise to the top of his nation and/or its army. In my case I think I will never stop striving to lead China to a socialist utopia and that will mean taking some considerable risks vis-a-vis the Russians and the Americans. One thing that gives me confidence and enhances my boldness is that I always feel I have the people, the army and the party behind me and with me.³ They would do anything for me, including fighting to the death. *(Startles Clausewitz by bounding on the table)* They know I am never afraid of failure nor death. They know I took on the Kuomintang early in my career and have never stopped fighting for them and leading by example. My life will ever be one struggle after another.

Clausewitz Courage is related to boldness in that it is also an antidote to danger. All soldiers, whatever their rank, must have basic courage. But there is another kind of courage that is required of the commander. This is the courage to accept responsibility.

Mao: Got it! Even as a young man, I organized local rebellions in the Hunan province. And if you glance at my curriculum vitae, you will see that I continue to seek and accept more and more responsibility. In 1946 I will take direct command of the Chinese Communist Party's military forces and in 1949 I will become Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party. If there were a

more responsible job that affected the lives of more people, I cannot imagine it

Clausewitz. I think I am detecting a bit of Ego here. Too bad Freud can't join us. He would have a field day with your relationship with your parents and your first so-called marriage. But I digress. And, please, don't be offended by my Ego comment. There is nothing wrong with Ego or ambition in a military genius. In fact, desiring fame and honor and rising above the competition manifests itself in an incredible thirst for knowledge about warfare which can only further the Clause, er, cause.

Mao I have never hidden my ambition. But why am I getting the feeling that if I had been born a century earlier, you would have written about me rather than about Napoleon? I certainly made fewer critical mistakes than he did.

Clausewitz Nobody's perfect. And in war especially there are things beyond even the military genius' control. Therefore, the military genius must control those things that he can. Above all, he must control himself. I consider self-control "the gift of keeping calm under the greatest stress"⁴

Mao Suddenly, I am "Four for Four". My family, my biographers, my friends and even my enemies will all tell you that I was always a patient, prudent and pragmatic man who kept his emotions subservient to and controlled by his mind. What's next?

Clausewitz: Let me add one more in the temperament group and then we'll turn to the intellect because I don't want to be here when the sun comes up. There's a key attribute called character and it's found in those who stick to their convictions.⁵

Mao Wonderful! Here's where I get to talk about the sacrifices I endured for the sake of my convictions. For example, I was living in the underground for twenty-two years after fleeing from the government's army in 1927 with my poorly armed troops. During the Autumn Harvest Uprising all four of my regiments will be destroyed.⁶ I struggled with Chiang Kai-Shek, Lin Biao, Japan, the Soviet Union and the United States--and this is the Short List.

One other thing: being a pragmatist, I never doubted that "The End justifies the Means". I experimented with different means but I never lost sight of the ultimate End, the creation of a socialist utopia based on the principles of Marxism. I had the courage of my convictions for sixty years.

Clausewitz Now, the other ingredient in my military genius recipe is outstanding intellect and it has several aspects: judgment, insight (or quick recognition of a truth), presence of

mind (or the ability of deal with the unexpected), vision and inquisitiveness. Take your pick

Mao Let me start with vision. My strategic vision was sustained for sixty years. I never deviated from my belief that I could adapt the principles of Marxism-Leninism to a large, rural semi-colonial nation like China and that I could rally the people, especially the peasants, to support my ideas. On certain things I was willing to be flexible. I understood that the peasants would be the soldiers of our revolution and the proletariat would be the leaders. If other communists think that I overemphasized the peasantry, that's too bad. For I am not ashamed to be one of them. Once a peasant, always a peasant

Clausewitz The military genius must have a sense of locality. Would you say that you have a highly developed sense of place?

Mao I do not want to bore you with all that I have written about base areas but I must brag about how perceptive I was in grounding revolutionary activity within the defensive perimeter of the base area. I have applied Marxism to solve military problems "and the most essential thing in Marxism is the concrete analysis of conditions."⁸ I believe that knowledge of the terrain is essential in warfighting and one of the reasons why my followers and I have been so successful in fighting conventional warriors like the French and the Americans is that we countered with guerrilla and mobile tactics that turned geography into a weapon.

To my sense of place, I would like to add my sense of time. To achieve peace, there is no limit on time. You should add a sense of time to your criteria

Clausewitz Too late. But what about presence of mind? Will you be able to deal with the unexpected?

Mao I think I demonstrated that over and over again. I am a very patient and flexible man. I recognize that war is filled with uncertainties and sudden, even improbable, events. But one must persevere and work through these challenges. I have viewed war in three basic stages: first, there's propaganda and terrorism, then guerrilla tactics and finally, full-scale war. Unexpected things can happen in each stage. To me, war is eminently comprehensible, even mundane. Although war is rife with uncertainty, it is something we, or at least I, can control as an understandable social phenomenon. That is why I spend so much time studying war and fine-tuning my ideas about it.

Clausewitz And do you think you have an inquiring mind? Readers will want to know.

Mao I'll read your work, won't I. (*Laughs to himself*) When I was in my teens and 20's, I was a voracious reader. I even worked in a library in Peking. I'll devour Darwin and Marx and Engels and other so-called Western thinkers because I want to learn as much as I can. As I matured, I was always willing to listen to others, for example, Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai.

I think there were people who thought that I was some sort of intellectual who was not very practical. This was not the case. No decent Marxist-Leninist would become paralyzed by theory. Ideas must serve a cause. I was a consistent and conscientious proponent of learning through doing. I was ever the practical and concrete man of action. I don't know how many times I said that "Our chief method is to learn warfare through warfare."⁹

Clausewitz People will want to know the extent to which your judgment and intellect will have lasting influence on the history of ideas. How would you characterize your legacy?

Mao I think my major insights were in four areas: first, the will of the people, second, the relationship between strategy and tactics, third, the blurring of the distinction between the political and the military, and fourth, the power of contradictions.

Clausewitz Care to elaborate. Wait, I think I'll need another ale. Bartender, two more ales, please. Your throat must be dry. I knew you were going to write volumes so I should have expected you would have a lot to say as well.

Mao You weren't exactly the most succinct writer I ever read either. But I'm not here to criticize. The will of the people is easy to explain. From what other source would a political or military organization derive its power? The people's will determines the war's fate and the country's fate.¹⁰ Let me quote myself: "The richest source of power to wage war lies in the masses of the people."¹¹

Clausewitz Maybe your people's will is akin to my passion of the people.

Mao That crossed my mind. I once commented that "There is dry wood scattered all over China which will flare up" and "the forest will continue to provide wood."¹² Such an incendiary event surely relies on the passion of the people.

Clausewitz. Will you discuss strategy and tactics next or shall we order some food first? I think I have had enough food for thought. I need some food for sustenance. Bartender! Two Venison Specials.

Mao I'll continue until the food arrives. I hate to brag but I have several worthwhile thoughts on strategy and tactics. I won't argue with those who say my ideas are not original. I acknowledge that my contribution is more in application than in creation. Let me summarize my basic ideas. I will claim that you can destroy forces that are superior on a strategic level as long as you are stronger in tactical engagements.¹³ The key is to realize that everything eventually breaks up as long as you can find its weakness so one goal of your intelligence gatherers is to find the enemy's weak point. I cannot resist quoting myself again. "Although we are inferior as a whole (in terms of numbers), we are absolutely superior in every part and every specific campaign. As time goes on, we shall become superior as a whole and eventually wipe out all the enemy."¹⁴ I like the idea of taking the enemy's strategic superiority and turning it into "a negative." If my troops keep winning battles and campaigns, suddenly the enemy is weak and we are strong. I see my troops moving from inferiority to parity to superiority and suddenly the enemy's strategic superiority is meaningless. I have often proclaimed that "Our strategy is 'one against ten' and our tactics are 'ten against one'."¹⁵ And when we go ten against one, we are a fully concentrated force hitting the enemy's weakest point. I should point out that my tactics were hardly concealed and that all the enemy had to do was read what I wrote to make a fair fight.

Clausewitz And please enlighten me on your synthesis of the military and the political entities.

Mao Some call it "the militarization of politics" and some call it "the politicization of the military." Either way there is no difference between the two concepts. The army must be political and the politicians must be militaristic or China is going to end up in the Fourth World. I always thought of military leadership as closeness to and mobilization of the masses.¹⁶ But since the pure non-revolutionary soldier was estranged from the masses, he needed political education in order to get him close to the people he was meant to serve.

I preached practical (read, survival) tactics, revolutionary populism and localized political-military hegemony, which represented a new paradigm for Chinese Communism and its army. I was convinced that the Chinese Red Army was "an armed group for carrying out political tasks of a class nature."¹⁷ But there was resistance to this idea because soldiers had been taught for ages to separate themselves from the civilian population. I am very proud of the bridges I built between our soldiers and our people.

Clausewitz And in my best Khalil Gibran imitation, Speak to me of Contradictions.

Mao. I have listed a few examples of contradictions within guerrilla warfare. have a plan and be flexible, carry out offenses in a defensive war, carry out battles of quick decision in a protracted war, have exterior-line operations within interior-line operations.¹⁸ These are not antagonistic contradictions that need to be corrected or resolved through revolution. Some contradictions are natural and benign. Over time I have listed at least fifteen war-related contradictions, e.g., offense and defense, advance and retreat, victory and defeat, positional war and mobile war, old soldiers and new soldiers and the regular army and guerrilla forces. Some contradictions can be left alone but not the one between the oppressor and the oppressed.

Clausewitz I know you said earlier that I wasn't much of a dialectician but, as you can see, my military genius is, in fact, a harmonious combination of two qualities, intelligence and moral character or temperament. And my military genius is not a theoretician who sits around all day contemplating war and writing essays. He is a man of action who succeeds in war, the ultimate military activity.

Mao I could not agree more. I read a lot and wrote a lot but it was all directed toward the people's victory. And let me add that if you can accept some military duality, then I can accept a version of your trinity. I once contributed to a Report on the Issues of Political Work in the Army which asserted that "one of the Chinese Communist Party's activities is achieving the unity of the revolutionary people, government and armed forces."¹⁹ Sounds trinity-like to me.

I don't know how you feel about people who reduce all you have thought and written to cliches and aporisms but it irritates me. In your case I think it is unfortunate that your trinity has been treated as something so flat, so one-dimensional. Yes, there are reason, passion and chance in war. But if one identifies passion with the people, reason with the politicians and chance with military, how does one account for the fact that those in politics and those in the military are, first and foremost, people? And if they are people, then they are susceptible to passion, especially in time of war.

Clausewitz. Well, you have the advantage of knowing how my trinity will be interpreted. I would certainly be disappointed if my thoughts were simplified because nothing in war is simple. It is among the most complex human endeavors.

One final point. I think the greatest military genius, the High Commander, eventually becomes The Statesman, the strategic thinker who pursues national policy.

Mao That may be true for some but in my case I was simultaneously a military and a political leader. No metamorphosis or evolution for me. I never separated the two pursuits and felt the synthesis of the two within me.

And, as long as I have your attention, I'd like to clarify something that will be misunderstood about my military views. Many superficial critics will opine that my guerrilla/mobile/revolutionary approach to war is a short-term, decisive and action-oriented response to damage but not destroy the enemy. Au contraire. I recommended an approach that fits the training and resources and time and place of my army. But all the gnat-like operations I would plan were part of a grand design to wear down and eventually annihilate my enemy. I have stated that "The destruction of the enemy is the primary object of war"²⁰ and I meant it.

Let me add one more conclusion that is extremely hard for me to admit. "Someday this (guerrilla) character will definitely become a thing to be ashamed of and therefore to be discarded but today it is invaluable and must be firmly retained."²¹ The guerrilla movement has been very, very good to me but I have to acknowledge that it is a phase through which revolutionary war is progressing.

So, given your criteria for a military genius, do I qualify?

Clausewitz Yes, undoubtedly. You certainly have the outstanding intellect and outstanding temperament that I described and your efforts were undeniably focussed on achieving military success. Your ideas about using guerrilla tactics and mobile warfare in the service of Revolutionary War were borrowed and successfully applied by many others. I'd venture a guess that they will be influential decades after you, like me, are dead and gone. Now I think I need to stretch my legs.

Mao: I've enjoyed talking with you but, if you don't mind my saying so, reading your material is going to be a real challenge for me. I will agree with many of your ideas, particularly the ones about force and politics. In 1938 I will quote your "war is the continuation of politics" statement but then I'll add that "war is politics and war itself is a political action."²² But you've got to admit that sometimes your writing is a bit obtuse.

Clausewitz: Sorry. I didn't plan to die so soon and leave all that unedited stuff lying around.

Suddenly, the tavern door swings open. Standing in the doorway, with the northern wind swirling around him, a tall, gaunt and bearded gentleman with a stovepipe hat peers into the dark room. He enters and closes the door behind him. He spots the two conversationalists in the corner.

Stranger Terrible night. Care if I join you?

Apologies again (and gratitude) to the playwright Steve Martin, whose play, Picasso at the Lapine Arcade, ended with the appearance of the third side of the 20th Century's cultural triangle. Elvis. Apologies should probably be extended to President Abraham Lincoln as well.

ENDNOTES

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, On War. Ed. and trans Michael Howard and Peter Paret. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 192

² Mao Tse Tung, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," 1957, quoted in Alain Bouc, Mao Tse-Tung A Guide to His Thought (New York: St Martin's Press, 1977), 191

³ Alain Bouc, Mao Tse-Tung A Guide to His Thought (New York: St Martin's Press, 1977), xiii

⁴ Clausewitz, 106.

⁵ Ibid., 107

⁶ Michael Elliott-Bateman, Defeat in the East The Mark of Yao Tse-tung on war (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 121

⁷ Bouc, 127

⁸ Mao Tse Tung, Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1963), pp 91-2, quoted in Michael Elliott-Bateman, Defeat in the East The Mark of Yao Tse-tung on war (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 122

⁹ Mao Tse Tung, "Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War," 1936, quoted in Bouc, 189

¹⁰ Shu Guang Zhang, Mao's Military Romanticism (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 27

¹¹ Mao Tse Tung, Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1963), p 31, quoted in Zhang, 19

¹² Mao Tse Tung, quoted in Bouc, 128. No citation

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Mao Tse Tung, "The Present Situation and Our Tasks," 1947, quoted in Bouc, 191

¹⁵ Mao Tse Tung, Selected Works of Mao Tse Tung, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1963-1978) No Volume provided, p 235, quoted in Stuart R. Schram, The Political Thought of Mao Tse Tung (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1963), 281

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¹⁶ Brantly Womack, The Foundations of Mao Zedong's Political Thought, 1917-1935 (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1982), 104

¹⁷ Mao Tse Tung, "Resolution for the Ninth Conference of the Communist Party Organization of the Fourth Army of the Red Army," 1929, Selected Works of Mao Tse Tung, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1963-1978), No Volume provided, p. 105, quoted in Schram, 272

¹⁸ Mao Tse Tung, Selected Works, Vol. II, quoted in Walter Darnell Jacobs, Mao Tse-tung as a Guerrilla: A Second Look (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Military Review, Vol. XXXVII, No. 11, February 1958), 28

¹⁹ Mao Tse Tung, "Report on the Issues of Political Work in the Army," (CCP Central Committee, 11 April 1944) quoted in Zhang, 15

²⁰ Mao Tse Tung, Selected Military Works, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1963) p. 154, quoted in Elliott-Bateman, 125

²¹ Mao Tse Tung, quoted in Jacobs, 30. No citation

²² Mao Tse Tung, "On Protracted War," May 1938, Selected Military Writings, p.226, quoted in Zhang, 13

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